

CONVERSATIONS

LUXEMBOURG & DAYAN

CONVERSATIONS

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“Let’s say for a moment that
there are too many images.
If you don’t have your way
with them... well... they will
have their way with you.”

DAVID CAMPANY

HAVE YOUR WAY WITH IMAGES

There is something unsettling about the thought of images standing up to their makers, misbehaving, escaping our control. On the one hand, images are the product of authors who manage every aspect of their appearance, whether they be painters, sculptors, photographers, or filmmakers – amateurs or pros. On the other hand, an author rarely (if ever) has full control over the images that they make. Elusive, rebellious beasts, images seem capable of regenerating and metamorphosing according to the period, place or context of their presentation.

The theme of our second issue of *Conversations, Have Your Way with Images*, first emerged in March 2017 during a panel discussion with David Company, Linder, and John Stezaker, on the occasion of our exhibition, *The Ends of Collage*. The panel was dedicated to the history of collage and the relevance of this medium to visual culture in the so-called digital age. The main topic of the debate was how does one navigate the overwhelming abundance of visual materials that characterises our time? What does it mean to speak about collage in an age where the gesture of cut-and-paste has been replaced by an alternative action that we now call ‘copy-paste’? Towards the end of the conversation, Company remarked, “let’s say for a moment that there are too many images [...]. If you don’t have your way with them... well... they will have their way with you.” His words sparked a lively debate in the room as soon as we opened the floor to questions. The audience and participants alike were split between those who felt that authorship is entirely in the hands of makers and those who felt that images are independent entities out of our command. The difference between digital, analogue and handmade imagery soon became part of the discussion. Some suggested that

manual craft traditions are now lost and have been replaced by new technological developments that empower images and weaken their authors. Others claimed that the digital realm is just as material and tactile as anything that came before it and thus the role of authors had not changed at all. “Working on Photoshop,” one member of the audience said, “is not less material than painting with a brush. And those who do not understand this are living in the past.”

The question of ‘having one’s way with images’ resurfaced again a year later, when Joseph Kosuth and Sarah Whitfield joined us for a panel discussion on the occasion of our show *René Magritte (Or: The Rule of Metaphor)* in May 2018. This exhibition was dedicated to the three years that Magritte spent in Paris between 1927-1930, during which he developed his groundbreaking cycle of paintings that we now recognise as the *word-pictures* cycle. Kosuth and Whitfield felt that Magritte left an important legacy to conceptual art, and they tried to reconcile his dedication to traditional painting with the conceptual inquiry that motivated his work from this period. Whitfield quoted Magritte’s famous dictum that “in a picture, image and text are made of the same substance.” The distinction between idea and material, in her view, was therefore cancelled by their unification in painting. Magritte’s pictorial language was suddenly revealed as a precursor of the digital sensibility towards images – molecular, malleable, and indifferent to the distinction between image and text. Magritte’s work, Kosuth concluded towards the end of the evening, is not about the author’s ability to plan the meaning of their painting in advance, but about the creation of gaps and disruptions in meaning that enable an image to have its own agency and to carry a potential for new interpretations that can emerge in different times and places.

Finally, in July 2018, we had an opportunity to host Cornelia Parker at the gallery for a long awaited interview about the relationship between her work and that of the late Alighiero Boetti. The talk (an extension of a larger panel discussion from 2015)

aimed to compare the effects of mass produced images on the material and political culture of the 1960s and 1970s with that of our present time. Cornelia discussed the common interest she shared with Boetti, namely certain geo-political questions concerning the dislocation of peoples, and the various ways in which knowledge can be mapped and visualised according to personal circumstances. Her position emphasised the advantages of forfeiting control during the artistic process, suggesting that letting images have their way with us is a risk worth taking after all.

We are grateful to David Campany, Joseph Kosuth, Linder, Cornelia Parker, John Stezaker, and Sarah Whitfield for taking part in our panel discussions programme and sharing their views on this important subject. We hope that our *Conversations* will continue to generate new perspectives on both past and present artistic practices by documenting the voices of contemporary artists, curators and scholars who remain indebted or preoccupied with the legacy of their predecessors.

Luxembourg & Dayan

JOHN STEZAKER

Collage, [...] is a resistance to the movement away from images [...], which becomes inevitable because images are now consumed with such speed.

“Time is another quantity to be considered [...] What I call photomontage [...] is almost as much working with time as it is working with photography.”

LINDER

The following excerpt is taken from a panel discussion with David Company, Linder, and John Stezaker, moderated by Yuval Etgar. The discussion took place on 14 March 2017 at Luxembourg & Dayan, London, on the occasion of the exhibition *The Ends of Collage*.

TOO MANY IMAGES: DAVID COMPANY, LINDER, AND JOHN STEZAKER DISCUSS THE USE OF FOUND FOOTAGE IN AND AFTER THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

YUVAL ETGAR: David, when we first met, I told you that I was writing about the effects of increased image production and consumption during the 1970s, and I mentioned that I think that this quantitative surge is at fault for a certain immunity that we developed towards images today. You did not agree with me at all. Could you elaborate a bit about your position on this subject?

DAVID COMPANY: You are asking me to rehearse my frustration with you? Well, it's a cliché isn't it, that we are bombarded or saturated with images. For a start, I do not know what a correct number of images would be. If you were to have a cull, and bring it back from 'too many' to 'an appropriate number', I don't know what that would be. The complaint about there being too many images goes back at least to the 1920s, you know, that first flourishing of what we now call the mass media. Plenty of writers at the time were saying 'stop! stop!', 'put the brake on.' And all of those metaphors about 'flooding' and 'bombarding' were put in play there and then already, nearly a hundred years ago. But I never thought it was the quantity that



From left to right: Yuval
Etgar, John Stezaker, David
Campany, Linder

was the issue. I think that any one image is too much. Not in the sense that we should not have images, I am not suggesting that. What I am saying is that images are wild things, and they are ambiguous things, and they are uncontrollable, and that is part of the appeal to the collage artist in our context here. And that would be true even if there was only one image in the world. So, I suppose the thought that there are too many images just never crosses my mind.

YE: Would you say then that perhaps we consume images differently (rather than exceedingly) today than in the past? That there is a change in the kind of sensibility that we now have towards these so-called ‘found images’ that surround us everywhere, on our phones, computers, televisions and billboards?

DC: I do. But I think that we could have said this at any point in the history of images. Marshall McLuhan was wise enough to suggest that new technologies, or in our case image technologies, do not replace old ones. Everything keeps accumulating. Perhaps the newer ones redefine our relationships to the old ones

or even reinvent the old ones. And I suppose that you could say that the extraordinary interest in an exhibition like *The Ends of Collage* has something to do with the fact that certain kind of dematerialisation of the image has alerted people anew to its material manifestations.

YE: John, your practice as an artist is largely invested in the use of found images. Did you ever feel that there are too many images circulating in the world?

JOHN STEZAKER: I tend to agree with David. Although from my point of view, the problem with images is that they have completely departed into the world of information, so they are now completely linked to language. And my job as an artist who produces collages from found photographic materials is to rescue the image from that space, from this profusion that is linked to a linear consumption of images.

YE: Could you say a bit more about that? What is a “linear consumption of images”? And how do your collages resist that?

JS: What I consider under the term ‘collage’ is a way of generating friction, or going against what I would otherwise call the ‘montage of everyday life’ that we experience through the media. It is a resistance to the movement away from images, their disappearance, which becomes inevitable because images are now consumed with such speed. I suppose then that instead of profusion, I would suggest speed as the cause for this feeling of numbness that we have developed towards images.

YE: Linder, your work seems to encourage a kind of overflow of images, doesn’t it?

LINDER: I suppose that there is something about that. Excess very much reflects my way of working. You know, over the decades of making what I call *photomontages*, the amount of materials the I collected became unmanageable in its own right. Just the physicality of the thing is more than one

can handle – so many copies of playboy, so many copies of decorating books. But then, the only way to diminish those facts is to get in there, to open those books, and start going back in time through them. So to me, ‘time’ is perhaps another quantity to be considered here in addition to David’s idea of ‘accumulation’ and John’s notion of ‘speed’. When I work, it is almost as much working with time as it is working with photography. I savour reading the letters in old playboy magazines, I linger on questions like why did cakes used to look like spaceships in cake-design magazines from the 1960s, or like zodiacs. All those things fascinate me.

YE: John, like Linder, the sources of the images that you collect is something that you take very seriously in your work. You focus almost exclusively on film-still photographs from B-movies of the 1940s and ‘50s, as well as earlier postcards from the pre-war years, predominantly such that depict peripheral sites of touristic interest? It seems like a very particular choice to make. What’s behind it?

JS: I am not sure if it was initially an ideological position that led me to these materials, nor was it a specialised interest. I can definitely say that there was a pragmatic reason for my choice. First, my need to do something with my collection of postcards, which I had been nurturing since adolescence. In the ‘70s though, right after I left college, a lot of the mainstream cinemas were closing down, so a lot of those archives of film-stills and film memorabilia began filtering into junk shops and I was fascinated by these materials. Then, there was a moment one day in 1976 or 1977, when I thought of combining these two kinds of images, inserting the postcards into the film-stills like masks or windows in the middle of the filmic scene or portrait. I suppose that the realisation was that they were both images that have to do with movement, or mobility if you will. Postcards move through the world and tell us about other places, and film-stills are records of movement. Together they merge the notion of movement in both spatial and temporal terms. And the fact that the postcards predate the film-stills

simply added to the temporal play, they become a space that is potentially both behind as well as in front of the image that surrounds them.

YE: Linder, you also employ old imagery in your work, but not exclusively. How does these materials come together?

L: Well, as you say, I use contemporary imagery in my work as well as older materials that go as far back as the 1920s. My use of contemporary imagery is a bit like a palette refresher. I would regularly enter a W.H. Smiths or wherever, and start taking biopsies of today's imagery from materials that surround us. Often, younger women ask me, what has changed over time? And I always feel that in some ways not an awful lot. If you look at pornography twenty years ago for instance, there are some very laboured stories that explain why a woman would suddenly be naked in a forest. And I am quite fascinated about these effortful narratives. But now, of course, contemporary pornography has no narrative, there are no costumes, no room sets, it really is just "point and shoot" in every possible meaning. So my recent works from the last months, are taking images from every decade and just slamming them all together. They are based on one found page as surface, and while I used to work in one-to-one scale, now I am enjoying to enlarge my materials. I use a large variety of image sources, including, for instance, Dalí paintings as backgrounds. I am having a fantastic time combining images from the last six or seven decades in one work and that is really odd because all of these particular inquiries into period consciousnesses that you mentioned get confused and mixed in each other this way. Patterns are shifting, focal points are changing, etc. I must admit that I am enjoying very much not to deliberate so much about the sources of images that I am using anymore. These allow me to work and generate a super high tempo, very much accelerated from my work of the 1970s.

YE: I noticed that Linder, you refer to your work as *photomontage*, and John, you speak of *photo-collage*.



Exhibition View:
The Ends of Collage, London,
March – May 2017

L: It's true. You asked me earlier if I saw my work as part of a lineage. Well, in 1976 when I made my first cut-and-paste works Dawn Ades' book *Photomontage* just came out with Thames and Hudson. That was a really big moment for me. It enabled me to see such a lineage and aspire to take my place within it one day. And the timing of it could have not been more perfect. It helped me define what I was doing. Then in 2014 I met Dawn for the first time in person and we spoke a lot about terminology. I learned from her that particularly in the last decade institutions started avoiding this term *photomontage*.

DC: Well, given that Dawn Ades' book came out then, if you think of the heated politics of the art world, it seems kind of obvious to me that she called it *Photomontage*, and not collage, because at the time I get the feeling that collage was associated with something more decorative or whimsical.

JS: I would disagree. I always saw collage as something that came out of Picasso, Braque, and more broadly speaking, it came out of painting.

In the late 1970s I wrote an essay about the problem of terminology and I guess I broadly still hold to my position. We increasingly live in a communication culture which is one that I would call *photomontage*, that is, a seamless transition between images, a kind of media construction of events. This is without a doubt the world that we inhabit today, and our children to an even greater extent. But if you go back to *montage* as an idea, you return to the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, who created the foundation for a universal terminology of *montage*. In a way, Eisenstein created Hollywood. He created that kind of linear way of reading the image. It is a part of a grammar that strives to reduce the image to a conduit of something to something else. Collage to me, on the other hand, is a resistance to that. Instead of seamlessness it exposes the fissures between images, and exposes the abyss behind the world of images. Collage is interruptive, it stops that speedy consumption by which images disappear. So to me, collage is increasingly signifying a kind of resistance or friction. And I don't know if this distinction bears any holding on the terminology that is out there, but I think that this is at least what collage should be.

YE: John, when you make your collages, how do you contemplate the found imagery for your work?

JS: I find my practice to be very fast and incredibly slow at the same time. So I get an idea for a combination of images and give it a go. Then I almost always feel that it is not quite what I want it to be, so I leave it aside, and there usually has to be a period between. And then it might be that during the process of dismantling something as a failure that something is happening. And then these intervals between each edit might take a good year or even more. Some pieces have been going on for years.

YE: Linder?

L: It is quite interesting to me that John, you would take such long intervals between the cutting and pasting stages. Today, I would probably work for

about two hours on a collage, then I would walk away before I apply glue, but I don't think that I could hold the tension more than a day. If that was the case, I would probably have to secretly put 'Pritt Stick' in the corners.

JS: Oh, I abandoned Pritt Stick ages ago. It is terrible. Do you use Pritt Stick?!

L: Actually, I am embarrassed to say that I use an even cheaper brand, but it is acid free and very silky. What do you use?

JS: I am not telling you.

L: Well, glue is the stuff that we never talk about, isn't it? We talk about images but we don't talk about glue. The sticky, messy, uncontrollable stuff that holds it all together.

DC: That's an interesting point. In fact, I wanted to say something about "the messy stuff" that often goes unmentioned. There seems to be something about collage that remains slightly illicit, naughty, slightly cheating? I am convinced that it has something to do with the fact that collage and photomontage are things that one does in private. That it has to do, on some level, with the feeling that it is something that you are not supposed to be doing, that you are getting away with it.

JS: I agree. There is a sense of violation, and as such of violence, when one makes a collage. And in the end I always feel that collage needs to offer reparation for that violence in some way. It has to redeem that act of violence, but it is strange that you have to create that act of violence in the first place in order to enable a relationship with the image on its own terms.

YE: In recent years, John, you started producing films based on compilations of stills from your collection, projecting them in the conventional cinematic rate of twenty-four frames per second. Is that another act of reparation?



JS: The films started as a hypothesis that I developed over the years. I thought, what if I project twenty-four different frames per second? What if I bring this huge collection of film-stills that I possess and that I have built over the years back into that kind of purgatory which is the media? If I really do that, what would be the result? And I didn't know how it would turn out, so I called my first film *Blind*, knowing only that in such high speed of image succession, you are unable to take it all in, your brain cannot receive so many images in such speed so it edits the input. But what emerged was a complete surprise to me, which was that everyone that looked at the film saw different films, and I too see different films every time I watch it. It is some kind of a magical cinema of discontinuity in a way. The films were an attempt to do the opposite of what my work was doing, that is instead of redeeming the images I wanted to make them disappear again, but it didn't, they flourished. It is still a mystery to me.

Exhibition View:
The Ends of Collage, London,
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YE: It seems to me that there is a real power struggle taking place between us and the images, a hopeless

attempt to regain ownership over something that we never really managed to control. Is this just my imagination?

DC: There is a really good line in Collin McCabe's biography of Jean-Luc Goddard that seems to answer your question. In the 1980s, VHS became available to private consumers, and as a result also a big part of the history of cinema. It was then that Goddard decided to make his famous, six-hour-long collage-film *Histoire du Cinema*. An autobiographical, philosophical history of cinema made entirely of fragments from existing films. McCabe says something very interesting about this film, and I can repeat it verbatim because it is so beautiful: "In a world in which we are entertained from cradle to grave whether we like it or not, the ability to rework image and dialogue is a matter of psychic and political health." In other words, let's say for a moment that there are too many images like you suggested at the beginning. If you don't have your way with them... well... they will have their way with you.

SARAH WHITFIELD

“The one overriding idea that motivated Magritte in his work is the aspiration to get rid of certainty. [To] disrupt the conventional order of things.”

“Painting was not Magritte’s work, it was his instrument – his brush if you will. At the end of the day an artist does what he or she needs to do. It’s that simple.”

JOSEPH KOSUTH

The following excerpt is taken from a panel discussion with Joseph Kosuth and Sarah Whitfield, moderated by Yuval Etgar. The discussion took place on 24 May 2018 at Luxembourg & Dayan, London, on the occasion of the exhibition *René Magritte (Or: The Rule of Metaphor)*.

AFTER WORD, VS. IMAGE: JOSEPH KOSUTH AND SARAH WHITFIELD ON RENÉ MAGRITTE'S PARIS YEARS (1927–30)

YUVAL ETGAR: The so-called ‘word-pictures’ cycle, which René Magritte developed during his three-year tenure in Paris between 1927-1930, is one of the most fascinating and complex bodies of work that the artist ever produced, combining words with images in a way that undermines how we use pictorial as well as literal language. Sarah, was Magritte conducting a linguistic investigation in these works? Or was it a pictorial one?

SARAH WHITFIELD: Well, in order to answer this question it might be worth setting up the scene first. Magritte arrived to Paris in 1927, aged twenty nine, only a couple of years after he began experimenting with surrealist painting. And while he was desperate to be accepted among the French Surrealists, he was not – at least not immediately. He remained an outsider to the group for a long while, partly because he was Belgian, but mostly because unlike his colleagues he held the view that art has nothing to do with aesthetics. One of the effects of this unusual position was that Magritte never really became friends with other artists, but rather he became friends mostly with writers and



Sarah Whitfield and
Joseph Kosuth

thinkers. He was only interested in what people wrote, in poetry, and above all in philosophy. And so, upon his arrival to Paris, instead of going to see shows, he spent most of his time reading or corresponding with his great mentor from Brussels, Paul Nougé, who was the initiator of Belgian Surrealism and the brains behind it. But what is important to understand is that the ‘word-pictures’ are the very first expression of this interest in philosophy and in text.

YE: Where was his studio at the time in Paris?

SW: Magritte never worked in a studio. In fact, he always worked from his kitchen or sitting room. Whatever small space he had to set up his easel. When he arrived in Paris, he hoped to find an apartment for him and his wife, Georgette, not too far from the centre of town, but his budget could only afford him an artist’s studio. So instead he decided to rent an apartment on the outskirts of Paris. This turned out to be quite a nuisance for him over time, since it meant that he had to take long journeys to town in order to keep in touch with the Parisian scene.



YE: But despite his failure to find a place in the centre of town, the move to the French capital certainly had its effect on Magritte's approach to painting. Soon after his arrival in September 1927, Magritte published a series of statements about the relationships between words and images in an attempt to explain his thoughts on the subject. Perhaps one of the most notable of these statements is that "in a picture, words and images are made of the same substance." Joseph, in your view, what is the meaning of this statement?

Exhibition View:
René Magritte (Or: The Rule of Metaphor), London,
 February – May 2018

JOSEPH KOSUTH: What Magritte is telling us here is that within the context of a picture's frame – which is, let's say, the artist's area of play – all elements are equal. Whether they are words or images or abstract forms they become part of the same semantic order. And if one manages (as Magritte did) to let go of modernist presumptions about the autonomy of the work of art and the specificity of the medium, it is easier to do that, I think.

YE: It is interesting that you say this, since unlike

so many of his colleagues, who experimented with new media such as collage, performance, or the readymade, Magritte remained loyal to the traditional medium of painting. What does that tell us about him?

JK: I think that there was a really good technical reason for Magritte's insistence on making paintings. But when I say technical I mean something else than what you would normally expect from this term. I think that the medium of painting gave Magritte the kind of resistance that he needed in order to go beyond these supposedly "radical" new media that his colleagues were adopting. I think that his move of bringing all these media back into painting was the real radical gesture. I have a good analogy that might clarify what I mean. Take, for example, a photograph by someone like Robert Mapplethorpe. Part of the outrage that people had when they first saw his work in the 1960s was the tension between the conservative format and the ostentatious content of the images. And there was another reason why Magritte made an 'outrageous' use of 'conservative' painting style, and that is that he *needed* painting for his work. Painting was not his work, it was his instrument – his brush if you will. At the end of the day an artist does what he or she needs to do. It's simple.

YE: Sarah, would you agree?

SW: Yes, but I would like to add another reason for Magritte's insistence on painting. This may sound very reductive, but I would like to suggest that Magritte chose painting because this was the only thing that he knew how to do. I often hear people who suggest that Magritte was not a good painter. But Magritte is actually an extremely good painter. One that cared a great deal about painting and who loved precision above all else. In fact, it was not just in painting; everything about his life was precise. For instance, if he entered a bar and the bottles were not organised in a way that he found acceptable, he would not have a drink until the bartender had organised them. It was almost, one might say, a neurosis.

YE: You both seem to suggest that in the ‘word-pictures’ the use of painting was instrumental – a tool in the service of meaning production. This makes me think of your work, Joseph, and most notably about the famous piece *One and Three Chairs* (1965). Your practice seems to offer viewers adequate dictionary definitions next to images of objects and the objects themselves. In Magritte’s word-pictures however, a similar mechanism is at play, only that the word labels are not compatible.

JK: I suppose that my work extends Magritte’s inquiry into the limits of language in a way. While Magritte pointed towards the creative potential of language using unexpected combinations of words and images, I realised that even if you apply a dictionary definition, which is intended to be the most adequate ‘word-label’ (as you call it) to the thing itself, it still fails to make up for the gap between the different semantic orders (the word, the picture, and the object). When a dictionary tries to tell you what the colour red is, for example, it testifies above all to the inability of language to account for our sensual experience.

YE: So like Magritte, your definitions also had the appearance of a ‘return to order’ but in fact their adequacy is what made them radical, generating the resistance you speak of.

JK: I guess you could say that.

YE: Sarah, what do you think inspired Magritte to start playing these word games in his paintings?

SW: The one overriding idea that I think motivated Magritte in his work here as well as elsewhere is the aspiration to get rid of certainty. So much art, he felt, was about certainty, and what Magritte does in these word-pictures completely disrupts the conventional order of things. I mean, look at any painting you want by Magritte, nobody can be certain about his use of meaning. I think that is something he introduces into art, and it is incredibly important.

On a secondary level, I would also like to propose that Magritte was motivated by the strong effect that cinema had on him. Magritte grew up at the same time as cinema emerged, and his entire visual language, I would argue, came from his experience of cinema. If you think about the word-pictures, and try to imagine the films that Magritte was seeing as a child, adorned with white subtitles on black backgrounds, you start seeing a different picture.

YE: Today, we look in hindsight on Magritte's motivation for exploring the nature of pictorial as well as textual representation and it seems to make a lot of sense, but how were these paintings received in the late 1920s? What was their impact on the Parisian art world?

SW: The truth is that they had relatively little effect on the Parisian circle of Surrealists. To some extent they were discussed among his colleagues and a number of loyal collectors, but it took a long time before the word-pictures had their real impact.

YE: Would you say then that the reason for Magritte's return to Brussels was because he gave up on the Parisian art world?

SW: I am not sure this is an accurate description of the way things went. In 1929 the big financial crisis took place and Magritte's dealer and close friend Camille Goemans went bankrupt. So, there he is, with no dealer, no sales or prospects of exhibitions. So, he decides to move back to Brussels and start doing advertising again to provide for him and his wife and to enable himself to continue painting.

YE: And when did the word-pictures finally had their break-through?

SW: It is extraordinary when you think about it, but these paintings were done in 1927 and yet the first exhibition that was exclusively dedicated to them opened almost thirty years later, in 1954. And that was not even in Paris or Brussels, it was in New York,

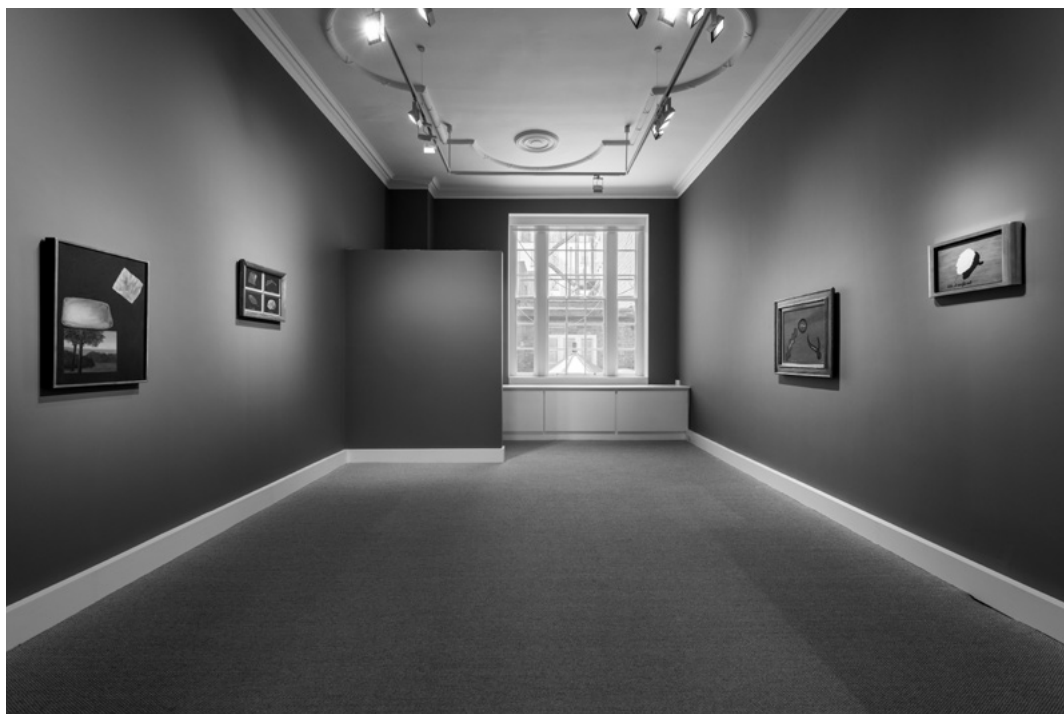
thanks to the gallerist Sidney Janis and Magritte's long-time friend, patron, and collector, E.L.T. Mesens. They called that show *Word vs. Image* and it had a fantastic list of works that came almost entirely from Mesens' private collection.

YE: And did this show finally bring Magritte some recognition? Was it a commercial success?

SW: Actually, the show was a complete commercial failure. Sidney Janis bought one painting from the exhibition himself, but nothing else was sold. It did however make a profound impression, as we now know, on a number of young, ambitious artists who would carry Magritte's legacy forward in different ways. Most notably, Jasper Johns acknowledged years later that his famous *Flag* paintings were inspired in part from his visit to *Word vs. Image*. And in fact, in the years to come Johns and Rauschenberg bought word-pictures by Magritte, as did Warhol, Rosenquist, and others. So you see, it was artists who were the first to realise what an important achievement Magritte made with his word-pictures, not wealthy collectors or big museum curators.

YE: Joseph, in your view, is the preoccupation with the gap between image and word to which Magritte dedicated so many of his paintings from this period still relevant to contemporary art practices today?

JK: It's funny that you mention that. A new show just opened at the Getty titled *Plato* in L.A. in which my work was included. Simultaneously, at Spruth-Magers, my gallery in L.A., they installed a group of my works in the viewing room including a couple of older pieces from a series called *Double Reading*, in which I reproduced popular cartoons strips and matched them with philosophical quotes by Hegel, Kierkegaard, Kant, and others. Now, of course my work lies in the very act of matching the cartoon and the philosopher in order to get the right play between them. We call it appropriation nowadays, but there was no word to make it polite back when I made these in the early '90s. Anyway, I arrived



Exhibition View:
*René Magritte (Or: The Rule
 of Metaphor)*, London,
 February – May 2018

to the opening of the show and I am immediately approached by three of my collectors, who are Hollywood lawyers, and they're asking me, all alarmed, if I got permission to use these cartoons. And I said no. I didn't. I didn't get permission from Hegel or Kierkegaard either. But more importantly, I said and pointed to the cartoon, that's not my work. And then I pointed to the text and said, that's not my work either. My work is the surplus meaning in the gap between the two of them. Those cartoons and these quotes are just props to get me that gap. I'm not in the doughnut business, I'm in the doughnut-hole business. Not a business really, and certainly it wasn't back then when I made the *Double Reading* series. But anyway that was the spirit of it, and I think that it echoes how prevailing these questions continue to be.

YE: What Joseph is saying sounds similar to the way that metaphors work. The exhibition at Luxembourg & Dayan promotes the idea that Magritte's word paintings function in a similar way to metaphors, only that they cancel the distinction between

word and image in the process. Did Magritte ever mentioned metaphor in respect to his work?

SW: Well, the truth is that Magritte was opposed to the very idea of thinking about his work through the prism of metaphor. In his view, a metaphor is something that behaved 'as if' it was something else. And he said, if I paint the sky in blood-red, I don't mean it metaphorically speaking. Having said that, it does not mean that his work does not have a strong link with metaphors despite his claim. I mean, he wouldn't be the first artist to deny what he was doing. I think that his opposition to the term metaphor originated from the fact that he hated when people applied symbolic meanings into his work, or tried to interpret it as a sort of Freudian riddle.

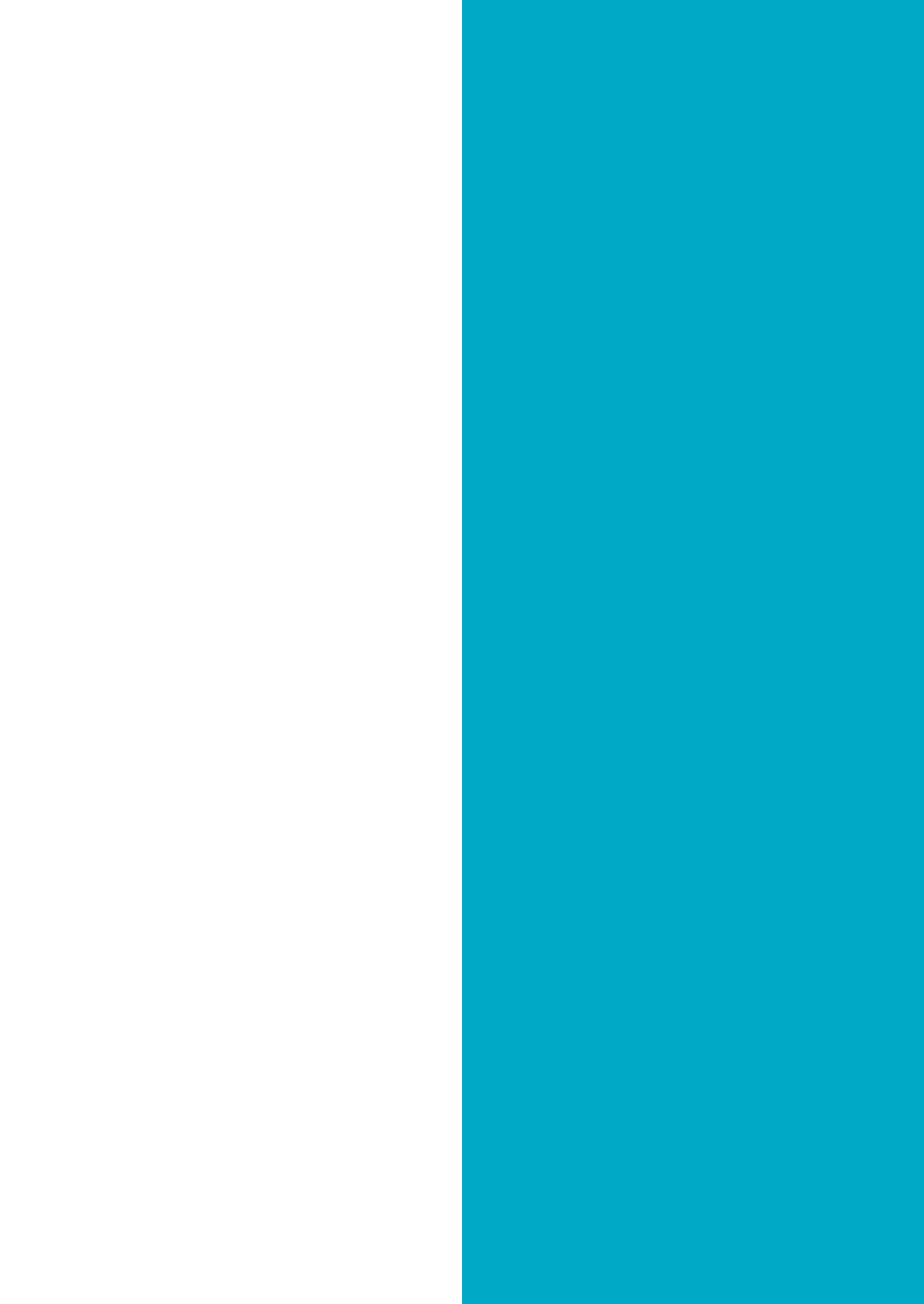
YE: I can see where the objection comes from, yet it seems difficult to deny that Magritte's pictorial syntax has much in common with the way we employ metaphorical statements. In fact, it seems to echo Nietzsche's writings on metaphor, which Magritte quoted in his writings on a number of occasions. For Nietzsche, the application of a word onto an object in the world is always an arbitrary gesture, new words are by definitions metaphors. And it is only later on, as we accustom ourselves to these words that they stagnate and become literal. I think that in that sense the exhibition's claim was that Magritte's legacy to the generations of artists that followed him is this moment of miss-match between a word and an image, between an image and what it represents and what it stands next to.

SW: Well it is the liberation of language, isn't it? That is very much something that Paul Nougé said, to go back to the little-known but widely important Belgian theorist. In the few writings that he left, and were since been published, you see that time and again he refers to the tyranny of language. All his efforts were invested in an attempt to escape this tyranny. I mean this is something that ties Magritte with the whole Surrealist movement. And if you think about Magritte's very first 'word-picture', *The interpretation*

of dreams, from 1927, you can see that it is based on children's reading primers, an educational instrument that signifies the authority of language.

YE: Joseph, after all that was said here, would you call Magritte and artist or a philosopher?

JK: Well, I would have to go with artist here, and reiterate the Nietzsche dictum: "in the main, I give the artist more credit than all the philosophers hitherto."



“We like seeing real life
because it is extraordinary.
Even the most boring bits can
become exciting through the
lens of a camera or the vitrine
of a museum display case.”

CORNELIA PARKER

The following excerpt is taken from a conversation between Alma Luxembourg and Cornelia Parker. The discussion took place on 3 July 2018 at Luxembourg & Dayan, London, revisiting a panel discussion from October 2015 that took place on the occasion of the exhibition *Alighiero Boetti: A Private Collection* together with Mark Godfrey and Robert Lumley.

INVENTING THE WORLD AS IT IS: CORNELIA PARKER ON THE LEGACY OF ALIGHIERO BOETTI'S WORK

ALMA LUXEMBOURG: There is something so utterly different, and yet so inherently alike between your practice and that of Alighiero Boetti.

CORNELIA PARKER: Boetti's work was certainly an important reference for me early on in my career, as was Manzoni, Yves Klein, and others that were associated with Arte Povera and New Realism. But at the same time I was looking over one shoulder westward to America for the breath-taking works made on an epic scale, like Cristo's *Running Fence*, Walter De Maria's *Earth Room*, Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. I guess they were the ones who showed me as a young sculptor that art can be temporal, that it can have an ephemeral nature, and that the history of sculpture is not composed solely of earth-bound lumps of bronze. It can be explorations of the *Void* with Yves Klien flinging himself out of a window, or Manzoni's encased lines. It was wonderful to realise that a thought could be expressed so physically, using the most humble of materials, on the hoof, beyond the limits of the studio, which to me always felt like a clichéd place in which to make art.



Cornelia Parker

AL: But was there anything specific about Boetti's work that distinguished his practice in your eyes at the time from that of his contemporaries?

CP: I was very attracted to his peripatetic nature, and that he worked in all kinds of different media. But above all it was the fact that he worked in collaboration with other people, and encouraged their freedom in the production process. Through this nonconformity he made a truly original contribution to art in the late '60s and early '70s.

AL: And why was that attractive to you?

CP: Well, it started once I realised that my own practice, even though I considered myself a sculptor,



was really, quite oral. I often lacked the technical expertise to produce what I wanted. The ideas were more important to me than the time required to master this or that technique. Having an intuitive knowledge of material or production process, however incomplete that might be, allowed a space to make a new object, a new piece of art. This tendency – much like Boetti's interest in making woven world maps that he did not know how to produce – led me to people who brought with them more than just a professional know-how. They brought agency, personal agendas, ideas, mistakes, and questions of their own, and they pushed me out of my comfort zone. I worked with the British Army for instance, with HM Customs, HM prisons, the Police and many more public bodies or individuals. Such collaborators do not always share my views, in fact they rarely do. But they also provide fascinating new perspectives about life and its qualities. I have no doubt that Boetti was stimulated by the same potential of alleviating the artwork from its singular point of view.

Exhibition View:
Alighiero Boetti: A Private Collection, London,
 October – December 2015

AL: Was that the case when you reproduced the Wikipedia page of the Magna Carta as a large-scale

embroidery with the help of some two hundred and fifty collaborators?

CP: Very much so. In this project, *The Magna Carta (An Embroidery)* (2015), a hand embroidered facsimile of the webpage of the Magna Carta (14m long), my collaborators were a wide range of people who had an invested interest in the subject: prisoners, judges, barons and baronesses, politicians (of all sides), whistle blowers such as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden but also artists, academics, and even children. The beauty with this project had much to do with the fact that it drew on the notion of craft, and that it imposed a durational manual practice on a digital format. Wikipedia in my view is like an embroidery; a page made by many hands, countless different voices stitched together, which unpacks as an embroidery of a collective kind of ‘truth’.

AL: A democratising tool, or at least claiming to be one.

CP: Yes, precisely. And as such it contains marks from all its makers. I was interested in the idea of the digital becoming analogue, and handcrafted. The embroidery (except those words stitched by prisoners and the images crafted by ladies of the Embroiders Guild) is quite rough in places, which I liked as well, particularly the verso of it, the inverse of things, but also simply the different stitches and the relationship between someone’s craft skills and their position or opinion. The (then) editor of the Guardian Newspaper, Alan Rusbridger pricked his finger and drew blood, when embroidering the words ‘contemporary political relevance’. The words that my collaborators were embroidering were about the very beginnings of a justice system, about the definition of freedom in a certain society. One prison for example, commissioned to produce a section of the charter would not embroider the words ‘Habeas Corpus’ (the writ requiring a person under arrest to be brought before a judge). The prisoners simply refused to do it. So, I approached Lord Igor Judge and Lady Judith Judge to embroider these words – a clash of positions thus emerged within a single sentence.

AL: This project has quite a direct historical link to Boetti's famous series of *Mappe* (Maps), where he would commission Afghani embroiders to reproduce world maps, admitting their mistakes, fantasies, and personal preferences of colours for example to his final compositions.

CP: In Boetti's case, for example, some of these craftspeople never saw the sea personally or were not familiar with the common way of representing it in blue shades, so they gave it all kinds of other colours – red, purple, green, etc. Similarly, many of the prisoners who worked on the *Magna Carta* project never saw a Wikipedia webpage in their lives since they have been in prison for so long and denied access to the internet

AL: I suppose that this takes us to the next problem that your practice, as well as Boetti's, raise. Namely, the expression of your own political agenda? Is it expressed or compromised thanks to the collaborative production process? This is even more relevant in your recent project as the Official Election Artist of the UK Parliament in 2017 – a very unusual position to occupy as an artist.

CP: The UK has a long tradition of such politically charged public commissions – which includes things like War Artists, who are commissioned at times of war. Similarly I was to visit (as part of the press pack) the political battlegrounds, the various manifesto launches, demonstrations, etc., and produce work based on my impressions of the battle fields. It's been a complicated situation to unpack, but I can say that part of the brief was to produce a politically neutral work. I loved the challenge of negotiating a no man's land, a territory that I have explored many times before. I made a short film *Left, Right and Centre*, where neatly organised stacks of newspapers from the six months leading to the elections are presented to the viewer on a table in the middle of the House of Commons according to their political dispositions – a big pile with The Daily Mail, The Sun, Telegraph, etc. on one side, a smaller one with The Guardian,

The Observer, etc. on the other, and the FT in the middle. The initial arrangement perhaps reveals something about the assumed power balance in the UK today.

The first part of the film is shot at night, the piles of papers illuminated by the light of a sinister slo-mo drone hovering nearby, but recorded, witnessed, by another cameraman. The space and material seems abstract at first, then slowly the location is revealed. The drone returns next morning and instead of consecrating this order, the papers appear to be disturbed by a gentle wind generated by the propellers of a drone, hovering over the table.

Gradually the drone is flying closer and closer to the stacks until it blows all of them and tries to clear the table. Only that instead of a clean slate, the papers scatter all over the parliament's seats, creating an unholy mess. The drone, having accomplished its murderous attack on order, leaves the house through the same doors that it entered, filmed from the point of view of the Speaker. Instead of his familiar shouts of 'order! Order!', what is left to the viewer is the opposite.

Everybody has a different point of view on politics, even members of the same party. And I, like Boetti, enjoy occupying problematic territories, one where the wish is to remain politically ambiguous, because that serves the work. Boetti was very much of the same disposition. He did not want to be annexed, to be made the voice of one political group or another. When he made work in Afghanistan and with Afghani people, the work became political because of its very conditions of production, the identity of its makers as refugees, their conception of home, of territory, etc. So by asking these people to use their craft in order to produce world maps he already made his work political. But he did not place his own politics on top of it.

AL: But wouldn't you say that the context of his own politics, Italy in the Post-war era, is definitely there?

CP: Context and the current politics make a huge difference. I remember when I showed my piece *Edge of England*, in Australia – it is made up of lumps of chalk that fell from the White Cliffs of Dover – and part of the debate that surrounded the work was about it being a post-colonial gesture. There was a suggestion that bringing my own coastline and installing it in Australia was a way of claiming territory. It was an interpretation far away from my thinking, but I am open to the fact that context and political ambiguity allow the work to have its own life, to speak for itself.

AL: Does this mean that the conceptual weight of your work comes before the material one?

CP: That is a difficult thing to say. In principle, I disagree with the elevation of concept over matter or vice versa. There is something about the truth to materials, so-to-speak, which I consider essential to art making. Materials are important because they have their own truth and their own history, chalk has history, embroidery has history, etc. And you think of the people who did it, their relationship to material and craft has a history too. My grandfather embroidered, he was in the trenches at the Battle of the Somme in the First World War, and became a prisoner of war. Embroidery, knitting and sewing, were something that men used to do to kill time. Fisherman used to knit, make nets. These intricate histories carry a weight to them.

AL: It seems to me like your approach to art making is to enable things to speak for themselves. It reminds me of Boetti's claim that "the greatest joy on earth consists of inventing the world the way it is, without inventing anything in the process." Would you agree?

CP: Yes. As Hogarth Fellow I curated a show at the Foundling Hospital Museum in London in 2016, which was titled *Found*. This potential that you speak of was very much the subject of the show. Among the various objects on display was a thread of receipts from a pawn shop accounting for years'



Exhibition View:
*Alighiero Boetti: A Private
Collection*, London,
October – December 2015

worth of objects pawned, mostly gold wedding rings. It was Ron Arad's contribution to the show. It dates back to 1951, which is the year of his birth. He found it in a skip one day and kept it ever since. The power of this object, which held proof to all the stories of the hundreds of people who had to pawn their wedding rings in that particular shop, has consequences that only real life can produce. Real life is always stranger than fiction. But it seems that we can't believe real life so we make it the subject of stories. That's why reality TV is so fascinating. We like seeing real life because it is extraordinary. Even the most boring bits can become exciting examined through the lens of a camera or the confines of a museum display case.

Published by Luxembourg & Dayan, London
2 Savile Row, London, W1S 3PA, UK

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Photo: Todd White Art Photography

Series Editor: Yuval Etgar

Project coordinator: Inès Leynaud

Copy Editor: Matthew Abrams

Design: Bravo. Charlie. Mike. Hotel.

Printed in the UK by PUSH

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